

All Saints

November 2, 2008

Rev. 7:9-17; 1 John 3:1-3; Mt. 5:1-12

Introduction. When I was a boy, my favorite event of the summer was the family reunion. My father was from Texas, and *his* family still lived *there*; so we rarely got to see them.

However, my grandmother on my mother's side was from a large family in the Wilkes-Barre area; and for many years, the extended clan would gather on a Sunday afternoon in summer at our home on the airport in Forks Township for a reunion.

The week prior we would wash all the old chairs stored in the barn.

We would clean out a section of the barn, in case of rain.

And in the early years, we would mow a baseball diamond in the field, because someone always organized a game of softball.

In later years we had an in ground swimming pool, and that became the locus of the afternoon's activities.

There was plenty of great food to share;

and my father used to taxi an airplane down near the house to give rides.

But the greatest joy was to see family that I rarely got to meet,
and to listen to their stories of "the old days."

1. This morning [evening] we celebrate our own family reunion of sorts. The church calls it All Saints.

Actually we celebrate a mini-reunion every Sunday as we gather at the Lord's Table.

When we use "This is the Feast" we sing some of the words from today's First Reading:

"Sing with all the people of God, and join in the hymn of all creation: Blessing and honor, glory and might be to God and the Lamb forever. Amen."

As we bring forward the gifts we sing:

[Sat.] "Let this be a foretaste of all that is to come when all creation shares this fest with you."

[Sun.] "Grace our table with your presence, and give us a foretaste of the feast to come."

And as I invite you to the Table, I conclude with the words:

And so with all the choirs of angels,

with the church on earth and the hosts of heaven,

we praise your name and join their unending hymn..."

Today, on the Festival of All Saints,
we focus especially on those members of the family
who already have joined that heavenly host.
In the prayers we will name those dear to us who have died during the last 12 months.

And in the Eucharistic Prayer, I will say:
“Remembering, therefore, the sacrifice of his life and death and the victory of his resurrection,
we await with all the saints his loving redemption of our suffering world.”

Today we **remember...** that each time we gather for the Lord’s Supper,
we join **our** voices with the voices of those so dear to us
who now surround God’s throne.

2. For me, All Saints is a somewhat mystical and sentimental day.
I admit, I often have to choke back the tears as I sing the final verse of the opening hymn,
because I can picture some dear friends and relatives among that glorious band.
“From earth’s wide bounds, from ocean’s farthest coast, through gates of pearl streams in the
countless host, singing to Father, Son, and Holy Ghost: Alleluia!”

However, it’s equally important to remember
that we, too, are numbered among all the saints.
We join them by virtue of our baptism.

A Sunday School teacher asked her class:
If I sold my house and my car,
had a big garage sale and gave all my money to the church,
would that get me into Heaven?"
"NO!" the children all answered.

"If I cleaned the church every day,
mowed the yard, and kept everything neat and tidy,
would that get me into Heaven?"
Again, the answer was, "NO!"

"Well, then, if I was kind to animals
and gave candy to all the children,
and loved my husband, would that get me into Heaven?"
Again, they all answered, "No."
"Well... then how can I get into Heaven?"
A five-year-old boy shouted out,
"YOU GOTTA BE DEAD!"

That's probably the biggest misconception about being a saint: You gotta be dead!
No... the fact is... you don't gotta be dead... at least not physically.
What you have to be is dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

3. This leads to a second misconception about being a saint:
you have to be very holy, if not perfect....
and who among us can live up to that?!

We think of a mother Theresa,
who gave her all of others,
who didn't seem to have a mean bone in her body.
Yet we know from her own writings that she suffered very severe times of doubt and depression.

Or think of St. Paul,
who was on his way to persecute the followers of Christ,
when the Lord appeared to him and called him to his ministry.

And that's what happens at the time of your baptism.
The Old Adam, the Old Eve, is drowned...
and a new you pops up out of the water.
A new you... a saint.

A final misconception about being a saint is that you have to be famous.
Again, we think first of people like St. Paul, St. Francis, or St. Theresa.
But the saints who have been most influential in *my* life
have been people who were largely unknown outside their immediate circle,
people not unlike that unnamed thief on the cross who said,
"Lord, remember when you come into your kingdom."

At our baptism we become a part of God's family,
a sister or brother of Jesus Christ himself;
and that's the only fame that really counts for anything.

Conclusion. Barbara Brown Taylor tells the story of Osceola McCarty of Hattiesburg, Mississippi.

“Almost no one in that town knew she was a saint...
until about three months ago.

“She didn’t look like one.
She was just a laundress,
an old black woman who had never married,
dropping out of school when she was in sixth grade
to begin a lifetime of washing clothes.

“That was the year her maiden aunt came out of the hospital, unable to walk,
and moved in with her family.
Twelve-year-old McCarty left school to care for her
and to help her mother and grand- mother with the backyard laundry business.
For the next seventy-five years that is what she did,
scrubbing the dark clothes on a washboard
and boiling the whites in a big black pot in her backyard
before hanging them all out on the line to dry.

“Her day started when the sun came up
and stopped when it went down,
and it was not until she was eighty-seven years old that anyone knew fully who she was.
That was the year she gave \$150,000...her life savings...
to the University of Southern Mississippi for black scholarships.

Taylor concludes: “On All Saints’ Day, we make the very bold claim that all these people,
St. Paul, St. Francis, St. Osceola, are our relatives.
And we remember them to help us understand
that being a saint means first and foremost... belonging to God.

As you leave here and return to the ministry of your daily life, remember:
Once you are baptized, you belong to God;
and all that remains to be seen is what you will do about it.

You don’t have to famous...
or perfect...
or dead.

You just have to be you...
the person God created you to be...
the person loved and forgiven and accepted by God... for Jesus’ sake.